I. Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

WEB OF FAMILY TIES

Sons and their wives are enjoined by tradition to forget all disputes and dissensions and 'give as much comfort to the old people in their last days' as they possibly can.

THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW

The daughter-in-law, coming from a different family and often from a different village, finds herself in totally new surroundings in her husband's home. Now she enters the new phase of life about which she has heard so much since the beginning of her later childhood. She has now to encounter the mother-in-law for whom she has an unmistakable dread. She expects her to be wicked, cruel and heartless. She has learnt to regard her husband's sisters as scheming and deceitful, and the wives of his elder brothers as troublesome and domineering. She expects love and friendship from her husband, but has to bear in mind the oft-repeated dictum of the village women that 'all men are uncertain' and that 'they cannot be depended upon'. She expects sympathy and friendship from her husband's younger brothers and his younger sisters—from the latter easily if they are not grown up and if they are not much older than herself. With the exception of these she has either to respect or dread most other members of the family. She comes to her new home with considerable diffidence and fear. She knows that her every act will be closely watched and criticized, and she has been taught to believe that however well she may act, it will not be easy for her to please her new relations-in-law. She leaves her parental home with a sorrowful heart, and enters that of her husband full of misgivings and uncertainty.

Notwithstanding the mental picture that she has had, she finds the reception given to her quite cordial. In most homes an effort is made to create a 'good impression' on her. At least for a few weeks she has some novelty about her, and is therefore cared for and looked after very well. The mother-in-law and sisters-in-law do not spare her a critical eye, but their comments are invariably made when the bride is not within hearing distance. But this phase lasts only a few weeks, or at the most, two or three months. Later she must be initiated into the ways and traditions of the household and should be taught 'how to do things properly'. Each house has some peculiarities that are distinctly its own, and in order to adjust successfully into its pattern it is necessary for the bride to know and respect these. She must learn her own part in the domestic

I. Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

work, and do it to the satisfaction of the hypercritical female relations. If she wants to make an impression, she must relieve the mother-in-law and other elderly and important women in the house of a part of their work by undertaking to do it herself. A mother-in-law is bound to be pleased with her if she offers to massage her feet at night. 'Good mothers' often train their daughters to take recourse to these methods for making an initial good impression on the hard-to-please mother-in-law. However, in some cases a different pattern seems to be followed. Some mothers say to their daughters, 'The more submissive you are the more your mother-in-law will make you work hard. If by mistake you do her part of the work on one day, you will find that it will become a regular part of your duty from the next day. The best way is to avoid all work which is normally to be done by someone else.' This view too is not without some truth.

Gradually the enthusiasm for the bride cools off, as she does not remain 'new' for a very long time. She is expected to pass the rest of her life in this house, and as such it is necessary for her to adapt herself to its ways. Her steps are watched; her contribution to the work of the household is critically evaluated, and comments are freely made to appraise her of the views of others regarding the quality and quantity of her work. The mother-in-law and the sisters-in-law keenly observe her talk and behaviour. Does she praise her parents and their home very much? If she does, the mother-in-law or one of the sisters-in-law will unearth some scandal about them. If she praises the fields belonging to her father, or even happens to mention the good food which she ate at home, her remarks would be noticed, and in return she would be taunted, either immediately, or at a suitable occasion later. Thus if she is tactless enough to say, 'I remember the rice in our house which had such a delicate flavour', in reply she would hear something like this: 'Yes, we know. In your parental house they served you platefuls of pearls and diamonds in place of rice; in this house you get only a handful of broken rice and paddy straw.' A casual remark from the daughter-in-law about her feeling tired, may be taken to mean that she is complaining about the hard work which she is made to do. The mother-in-law would retort, 'Yes, my flower, I know you are delicate. Why? In your parents' home you had dozens of servants and you did not have to move so much as a grain of rice, and here you work from dawn to midnight. They

I. Dube E-5 (1951-52) 1955 AW17 Telugu AW17

sought to have married you to a prince. Why did you come to a house as poor as this?' And so it goes on. The mother-in-law and her daughters, married or unmarried, form one clique. The daughters-in-law of necessity form another, but they are divided among themselves, and have rivalry, jealousy and suspicion for one another. The pattern of inter-personal relations emerging from it is very complicated. There is always considerable back-biting and telling of tales. Alliances are formed and broken periodically. A daughter-in-law working diligently to find some favour with the mother-in-law is envied by the other daughters-in-law, who never fail to find fault with her, and always manipulate things to place the blame for anything going wrong squarely on her. In a simple and casual utterance, very often, some hidden meaning is read: on the other hand, explosive remarks are couched in simple words and very innocently made. The intrigues and jealousies among the womenfolk in a joint family are the despair of men. 'If we listen even to a fraction of the goings-on in the family, we will lose our heads', say the men. Others add philosophically, 'God has made mothers-in-law to quarrel with the wives of their sons coming to their homes. We cannot help it. Men will not remain men if they cease quarrelling: we shall all become gods!'

This is indeed a very well-established social pattern. To a mother-in-law, none of the daughters-in-law is perfect, although she may have preference for one over and above the others. From the daughters-in-law's point of view, a mother-in-law would ever remain a mother-in-law. 'Good and bad scorpions, both have the sting; the difference is that the one uses it more often than the other.'

I have already pointed out that the wives of brothers living together occasionally unite against the mother-in-law, but they too have their mutual jealousies and disputes. Husband's sisters, when they are young, are often quite friendly towards their sisters-in-law, but as they grow up they 'get wings' and start indulging in back-biting against them.

The daughter-in-law must maintain sufficient distance from her husband's father and his elder brothers. Unless it is absolutely necessary they should not speak to one another, and when it cannot be helped they must communicate in the minimum of words. Familiarity or intimate talk between them is regarded as highly improper. On the other hand, with the husband's younger

brothers the daughter-in-law has terms of privileged familiarity, and while they are not expected to cross certain limits, tradition permits them to indulge in joke and banter. Unmarried brothers-in-law provide sympathy and friendship to the harassed wife, but when they grow up they too are drawn to their wives, and the former ties of intimacy are gradually forgotten in the humdrum realities of life.

SIBLINGS

Social rules demand that there should be solidarity between siblings, especially between brothers, and that they should 'love and help one another'. The older brothers and sisters, particularly the latter, must share the responsibility of looking after the younger ones with their parents. In actual practice up to the age of six or seven they are constant companions; later the sisters gradually become absorbed in feminine pursuits and are thus unable to participate as freely in the children's games as they did before, and the boys also develop greater interest in their respective play-groups. Thus, to begin with, the inter-personal relations between the siblings are close in their early childhood, but later they develop on clear-cut lines, and distance between the sexes increases gradually.

The elder siblings can claim some 'authority' over the younger ones. When the mother is otherwise occupied or is ill, the older siblings have to look after and care for the younger brothers and sisters. Particularly the older sisters have to lend a helping hand to the mother, and very often children become so much attached to them that they come to regard them as substitutes for the mother. When siblings of more or less the same age-group have to help support and defend one another, in their dealings with the other village children, the older ones must keep an eye on the behaviour of their younger brothers and sisters and bring their faults to the notice of the parents. The older siblings can occasionally spank the younger ones under their charge, but they must not do it too often. In return for the limited authority which they enjoy, they have to make some concessions. When a younger sibling starts crying for something, it is expected that an older brother or sister should forgo his own share to appease him. 'He is younger; he does not understand it, but you are older and understand everything. Let him have the thing. After all, he is your brother',